

# Genesee Country Express

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## Canal Era Boom Brought Change to Dansville

Last week's fire which destroyed the commercial complex along Ossian and Spruce Streets recalled an exciting era of Dansville history—the canal days.

The Genesee Valley Canal linked the village to the outside world by connection with the Erie Canal in Rochester. It was a raucous time, perhaps, but one which brought growth and prosperity to the community.

Those days are long gone and the fire struck down most of what remained of the village's eastern terminal of the canal.

The following story, authored by historian Wilfred J. Rauber, tells when, how and why the canal came to Dansville and brings to life the way we were in another time. Readers will be able to relate with that era when they view the ruins that stood beside that marvel of transportation. Here's his delightful tale:

On a casual motor tour about the village and nearby area, sightseers might be surprised at the many boats parked on driveways and lawns—right here in landlocked Dansville! Most of these watercraft, varying in size and design, rest on trailers for they must be hauled several miles to navigable waters.

Such a task would not have been necessary back in 1842, and for many years following, when vessels floated right into downtown Dansville on man-made channels.

In those days, inbound and outbound boats had full passenger lists. Furthermore raw materials, as well as goods made locally, filled a fleet of freight barges destined for markets reached through canal system ports at Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Utica, Albany and even New York City.

Actually the very early state canal construction proposals had been bumped about, and delayed, in political sparring between Democrats and Whigs for a decade. Then two major projects gained approval, work on them began.

Champlain Canal, completed in 1823, furnished a navigable link between the lake by that name with Hudson River. Two years later the great east-west canal

opened from Buffalo to Albany. This one was sarcastically tagged "Clinton's Ditch" or "Clinton's Folly" as some, obviously not his supporters, cast barbs at Governor DeWitt Clinton who had provided the driving force to bring it about. On Oct. 26, 1825, the Governor climbed aboard a barge in Lake Erie to accompany a keg of lake water via the canal to New York City, where he dumped its contents overboard with brief ceremony indicating a wedding of the waters. Actually the official name of that controversial waterway became Erie Canal.

Such man-made navigable channels were ballyhooed as providing the means for the farm, mill and factory products, of inner New York State, to reach lucrative markets. Canal business brought growth and prosperity to Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Utica and Albany. It also encouraged building of additional canals here and there across the State. They were called "Feeders", particularly those leading to the Erie Canal.

Influential people joined the ranks to promote Genesee Valley Canal, a waterway designed to link Rochester with the Allegany River near Olean. This one had particular importance in Dansville where there was enough political wallop to convince planners it would be prudent to include a Dansville Branch which would leave the main channel as it passed through Shakers (Soyea).

Thus when the canal building reached that point (Shakers) in 1840, the original work crew continued toward Olean as planned. They were destined to encounter difficulties at various places, including the High Banks of the Genesee, and would not complete their job until 1856.

Meanwhile a new construction crew, along with horses, mules, scoops, started work on the easy-to-build 11 mile stretch to Dansville. On today's road map the course of this canal would follow closely that of New York State highway Route 26.

The branch crossed Canaseraga Creek via aqueduct behind what is now Foster Wheeler plant. Then it passed through Comminsville.

Upon reaching Dansville village the channel ran parallel to lower Franklin Street before making a sweeping bend southward as Dock Street does today. It continued in that direction to terminate at Mill Creek where a dam had been constructed to impound water. This flowed into the canal through a sluice for purposes of maintaining the navigation level and to operate locks.

There it was, beautiful to behold, this water filled man-made channel 42 feet wide at the top and 26 at the bottom. Eight locks controlled rise and fall between Dansville and the Shaker intersection from which point 41 miles of water filled canal stretched northward to Rochester and the Erie connection.

Noisy announcement of branch completion came on Nov. 1, 1841, when a New York State scow, loaded with dignitaries, made a trip from Shakers to Dansville. A cannon, on board the vessel, blasted salutes at frequent intervals.

After a parade to the music of Vicker's Artillery Band, an enthusiastic local crowd gathered alongside the canal, at Dansville's west village line, to welcome officialdom. Immediately on arrival someone aboard the scow loosed a cannon blast. This disrupted a planned formal program as horses stamped, upsetting buggies and surreys. Local bigwigs found themselves sprawled on the ground, covered with dust. The official opening certainly took an unexpected twist that day.

After some order had been restored, the well dressed M.H. Mills, of Mt. Morris, made a formal presentation speech from security of the scow but Dansville's Colonel Samuel W. Smith appeared quite disheveled when he delivered his oration of acceptance on the barge bank.

The Dansville Branch had been officially opened but commerce did not assume importance until spring of 1842. That was when boom time came to Dansville.

Along the canal, within the village, more than a hundred workmen were busy constructing wharves, lumber mills, a tannery, yards for building barges, and a

half dozen hotels on Jefferson Street. From a wide surrounding area wagons brought merchandise for shipment—lumber, potash, potatoes, butter, cheese. They even hauled boles of trees from Perkinsville. Special barge arrangements were needed for transporting them to New York City shipyards where they became masts and yards on seagoing ships.

Business boomed with money coming in as never before, but this was on the west side. The uptown fellows expressed disapproval in strong language for they had been left high and dry.

These men were openly hostile as they claimed Faulkner family menfolk, strong politically, had deliberately steered the canal to their land holdings where they could reap a harvest of dollars.

Faulkners, on the other hand, claimed no alternative route existed. The channel had to get water from Mill Creek which happened to be on their land, they said. Uptown men didn't buy that story and resolved to do something

about it. First of all they raised, by subscription, \$6,000 to finance any acceptable venture. Then came adoption of a name—"Dansville Volunteers."

The initial draft from the treasury purchased a plot of ground which by today's landmarks would be along Ossian Street between K.G. Richmond Inc. and the old mill on Spruce from Ossian to Milton Streets. Excavators came on the job site at once to make this entire area into a canal basin which at the time, of course, held no water.

From the Milton Street end the volunteers purchased a strip 50 feet wide extending westward to the big bend on the canal. Excavators went to work there also, with shovels, horses and scoops—they were digging out a channel.

The purpose of all such activity could not be disguised. Most everyone knew the Volunteers, led by George Hyland and Herriott H. Brown, intended to connect their system with the state canal, peacefully or by force.

Some Dansvillian's kept New York State officials well informed about the 1844 intentions of the Dansville Volunteers and on excavation progress. Come the day when it appeared workmen would cut into the established canal, three barges carrying state workmen arrived at the scene.

These men, led by their foreman, were armed with pick-axes and shovels. They were deployed along the canal bank with orders to keep Dansville workmen from digging away those last few yards to earth to join the channels.

On the narrow intervening strip, Volunteer leader George Hyland confronted the state foreman. Behind Hyland, Dansville Volunteers supporters stood ready for battle, also armed with picks and shovels.

When, after strong words, Hyland's good right fist downed his foreman opponent, the battle began. It was not a long one. The state workers were motivated only

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**CRUMBLING BUILDINGS**—This was the icy scene that followed in the wake of the fire that last week destroyed a commercial complex on Spruce and Ossian Streets. The structures date back to Dansville's era as a canal town in the mid-19th century.

### Focus on Economic Development

## Chamber Plans Dinner

A Genesee State Teacher College professor will be guest speaker at a special dinner program at 7 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 23, at Brax Burn Recreation.

David Martin, professor of economics in the John Wiley Jones School of Business, and author of a 32-page study assessing the economy of Livingston County, is slated to speak on the future of the Dansville area.

The event is being sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce in conjunction with the local Business Association and the Dansville Economic Development Corp. It is the second meeting for discussion about the economic future of the community. Tickets for the dinner are available at \$10 each at the three local banks.

A panel discussion was held last month and a public meeting is to take place next month.

Martin, in his study, notes Livingston County, and particularly the southern portion — including Dansville — is vulnerable to "deindustrialization" trends that have afflicted other areas.

Noting that "sooner or later it (deindustrialization) is going to happen in Livingston County (Dansville)," Martin said it is not necessary to go through the anguish experienced by other communities "if we implement an aggressive, pro-development policy in advance before adversity strikes" the area. He urges residents to become organized and develop plans before the problem arises.

Local business people and civic leaders have expressed growing concern over the decline in the

growth of the economy in the Dansville area, and — with the recent announcement of new assessment figures in North Dansville — expressed alarm that the area's growth remained near stagnant listing only a \$19,000 increase in assessment compared with \$2 million to \$6 million growth in those towns in the northern portion of the county.

North Dansville Supervisor Robert Hart, one of the panelists during last month's meeting, said to the gathering of nearly 70 persons, "Dansville hasn't been receiving any new businesses; it's not getting the housing projects that they're getting in Avon, Lima and those areas. So as a result Dansville's battling a current to stay even with our tax base...the tax base is what determines where the revenues or the proportion of the revenues come for the operations of the schools, the county, the town and the village."



**CONTESTANTS**—The Saylor sisters, Laurie, left, and Peggi, both students at Dansville Senior High School, are winners of the annual Oratorical Contest held Friday in the auditorium. They are flanked by officials of the event sponsored by Daniel Goho American Legion Post (from left) Post Commander William Dixon, a judge; Richard Eades and Brad Chapman, co-chairmen. The girls will go on to the Livingston County contest in Caledonia later this month.

## They Talk in Legion Test

There were no losers during the annual Oratorical Contest conducted Friday at the Dansville Senior High School sponsored by Daniel Goho American Legion Post.

Sisters, Laurie and Peggi Saylor,

junior and senior students, respectively, at the high school, daughters of Ronald and Karen Saylor of Dansville, were the only contestants for the event.

Following their talks on the

Constitution, judges tabulations resulted in Laurie Saylor named to represent the local Legion Post, said Brad Chapman, program co-chairman. Peggi Saylor will be sponsored by Scottsburg American Legion Post.

Judges were Quenton Masolotti, Robert Minemier, Social Studies Teacher Leslie Bowden, English Teacher Mary Corey and Post Commander William Dixon. Richard Eades, Social Studies Department chairman and co-chairman of the contest with Chapman, also served as contest coordinator.

The students will participate at 1 p.m. Jan. 24 in the Livingston County American Legion competition to be at Caledonia.

The winner of that event will represent the county in the Seventh District American Legion Oratorical Contest to be at 1 p.m. Feb. 7 at the Senior High School in Dansville.

First place winner in the district will go on to the Department of New York competition later this year.

## Samaritan Fund Dinner Scheduled in Dansville

Dansville Presbyterian Church has scheduled the seventh annual Samaritan Fund Dinner for Tuesday, Feb. 9.

The Samaritan Program is a low-interest, revolving loan fund for those seeking rehabilitation for chemical dependency.

A reception is planned at 6:30 p.m. in McKee Parlor in the church with dinner following at 7 p.m. in John Rayen Welch Hall. Entertainment will be provided by Natalie Petti, young Dansville performing artist.

Guest speaker will be John Walsh, Rochester community relations director for the Caron Foundation. His topic is "Adult Abuse of Alcoholics."

There will be a \$10 ticket donation. Tickets are available from David Reinholdt, ticket chairman; Ferguson's Dress Shop, Reinholdt Clothing, K.G. Richmond, the church office and at Quinlan's Pharmacy in Wayland. As seating is limited, early reservations are suggested by the dinner committee.

Those unable to attend the dinner and wishing to support the project, may make contributions to the Samaritan Loan Fund at the Presbyterian Church office, phone 435-5363. Further information on the loan program is available from Rev. James Bender, pastor of the church.

## Students Perform In Festival

Several students from the Dansville Senior High School Music Department participated in the recent Solo Festival sponsored by the Genesee Valley School Music Association at Genesee State University College.

Each student performed a previously prepared solo before a state-approved adjudicator, being judged on such musical content areas as tone, technique, accuracy, interpretation and intonation, with the final evaluation mark being assigned. All solos were graded by difficulty, with level six being the most difficult and level one being the easiest.

Two students, junior Brian Stoner (trumpet) and senior Myra Kemp (oboe) distinguished themselves by earning a perfect score of 100 on their level six solos.

Others receiving a level six A-plus were Theresa Doty (flute) and Judy Kim (alto saxophone). Receiving a level six A was David Glover (trumpet), while Julie Fournier (trumpet) earned a

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## Supervisor Board Assignments Set

Committee assignments for the Livingston County Board of Supervisors were announced last week after James Steele of Avon was reelected as chairman of the legislative body.

Dansville Supervisor Robert Hart was named chairman of the Supervisors' Committee which includes Gerald Johnson of Nunda as vice-chairman and Dean Mehlenbacher of Portage. Johnson is chairman of the Public Works and Transportation Committee with Daniel West of Livonia as vice-chairman and Charles Dickerson of Ceresus as member.

Hart will serve as a member of the Finance Committee headed by Thomas Wamp of Ossian with Walter Kingston of Genesee as a member. The Dansville man also serves as vice-chairman of the Judicial Committee. Francis Terry of Mt. Morris is chairman and Harold Weber of West Sparta is a member of the unit.

Other committee assignments include: Agriculture and Soil Conservation—Mehlenbacher, chairman;

Floyd Anderson of York, vice-chairman; Lawrence Wachholder of Groveland.

Buildings—John Douglass of Leicester, chairman; Kingston, vice-chairman; Dickerson.

Highways—James Culbertson of Sparta, chairman; Douglass, vice-chairman; Howard Kramer of Springwater, Kingston, Dickerson.

Legislative and Public Relations—West, chairman; Douglass, vice-chairman; Johnson.

Public Health—Kingston, chairman; West, vice-chairman; Mehlenbacher.

Public Safety—Ronald Yorks of Lima, chairman; Culbertson, vice-chairman; James Layland of Caledonia.

Salary and Negotiations—Wamp, chairman; Anderson, vice-chairman; Terry, Yorks, Weber.

Social Services—Anderson, chairman; Terry, vice-chairman; Kramer, Yorks, Layland.

Taxes—Kramer, chairman; Yorks, vice-chairman; Wachholder.